

# TECHNICAL NOTES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

WYOMING

SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

Biology No. 215

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Subject: MARSH HAWK\*

## General

The marsh hawk is an opportunistic feeder with the numbers and types of prey taken varying with local and seasonal abundance. Mammals such as voles (Microtus spp.), ground squirrels (Spermophilus spp.), and juvenile cottontails (Sylvilagus spp.) make up the bulk of the annual diet with passerine birds taken in increased numbers in the summer. Fresh carrion made up an important part of the diet during the winter in both Pennsylvania and the north-central plains. Slow moving prey such as insects, reptiles, and amphibians were common food items of juvenile marsh hawks in Pennsylvania.

Marsh hawks hunt by coursing for long periods just above the vegetation in large open fields and also by alternately flying and landing on ground perches. The best foraging areas are fields with low vegetation that contain numerous small openings. The same hunting grounds are used daily.

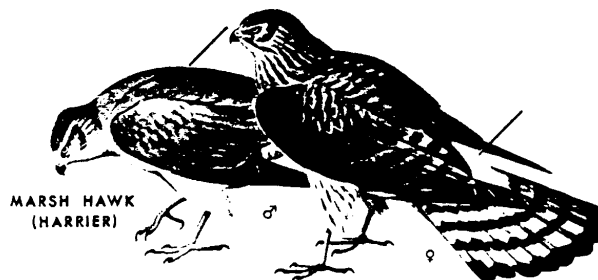
## Water Requirements

Marsh hawks are usually found near a water source.

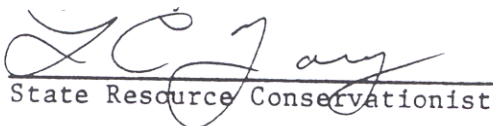
## Cover Requirements

Marsh hawks inhabit fields, prairies, and marshes and are common in marsh habitat in Colorado.

Marsh hawks normally roost on the ground. although stumps and fenceposts are occasionally used for perches.



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\*Information taken from Ecoregion M3113 Handbook and Habitat Suitability Index Models, Wildlife Species Narratives (literature searches), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, various dates between 1978-1984.

#### Reproductive Requirements

Marsh hawks are ground nesters with preferred habitat being wet situations within marshes, margins of sloughs, and dense vegetation in open grassy areas. Low areas comprised of sedge (*Carex* spp.) and willow (*Salix* spp.) contained 61 percent of the nests recorded in an agricultural region in Wisconsin. Nests in Canada were found directly on the ground in wheatgrass (*Agropyron* spp.) or as floating platforms in a wet cattail (*Typha* spp.) marsh. There was higher fledgling success in the cattail marsh due to a decreased vulnerability to predation. Low fledgling success rates were reported in a drier cattail marsh in New York (18 percent).

#### Special Habitat Requirements

No special habitat requirements were found in the literature.

#### Interspersion Requirements

Home range size varies widely with the season and locality. Considerable overlap in the home ranges of marsh hawks was found in Minnesota and Michigan. The immediate vicinity of the nest is vigorously defended. Marsh hawk nests were spaced about 450 yds (405 m) apart in Minnesota and from 40 yds (36 m) to 200 yds (180 m) apart in New York.

Night roosts composed of up to 60 birds commonly form in the winter with each bird dispersing to its own winter hunting range at sunrise.

#### Special Considerations

Marsh hawk nests are vulnerable to destruction by dogs and cats. Plowing accounted for 56 percent of the nest failures in Michigan.

An accumulation of pesticides in the bodies of marsh hawks was thought to be the cause of a sharp decline in breeding activity over a period of years in Wisconsin.